INTERPLAY
April 1968

BIOGRAPHIC

Two "Think Tankers": Carl Kaysen and Herman Kahn

MILTON VIORST

Talk of world power, and for most people the measure is weapons. But perhaps another index, equally important if less coercive, is the proportion of a nation's resources dedicated to thought. In the United States, contemplation has become something of a passion. Probably never before in history has a society paid so many men purely and simply to think.

Officially, the newly devised centers of intellect are called "institutes." Colloquially, they're referred to as "think tanks"—places where men with superior minds sit around, in rather undisciplined fashion, doing virtually nothing but stimulating other men with equally superior minds.

Expectably, the result is often banal, but with some frequency thoughts of considerable significance emerge. Only a society with wealth to spare could finance so many thinkers in reflection so distant from the execution of policy. However one may criticize America's actions, one must marvel at the effort being put into her thought.

From coast to coast there are institutes, each functioning in the particular domain that it has carved out for itself. With the reputation it has built as its chief asset each seeks its financing, which is normally forthcoming from agencies of government, individuals or private organizations dedicated to or operating in the area of its interests. In California there's the Institute for the Study of Democratic Institutions, on guard against flaws in the system of government. Washington has its Institute of Policy Studies, in search of fresh aims and methods for revolutionizing society from the left. In Chicago there is the Adlai E. Stevenson Institute, anxious to assert the intellectual stature of the Midwest by the contemplation of great international issues. Every institute prides itself on its independence of spirit and devotion to truth. Every one is hopeful of finding within its embrace a latter-day Marx or Adam Smith or Clausewitz, someone who will change the face of the world through the force of an idea.

Granddaddy of the institutes and still the most prestigious is the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton. Though it was established almost 40 years ago, well before the days of superpowers, it was nonetheless the product of America's march to world leadership. Its founder, the remarkable Abraham Flexner, had become much troubled by the decline of Germany's magnificent universities, and to some degree those of England and France, after the exhausting experience of World War I. Though not a professional scholar himself, he was a learned man who had spent a career encouraging the application of rigorous intellectual standards to American education. Then in his sixties, he believed it was imperative for the United States to begin taking a leading role in the encouragement of scholarship. In the late 1920s he conveyed this notion to Louis Bamberger and his sister, Mrs. Felix Fuld, department store heirs, who were looking for a productive way to dispose of their fortunes. Bamberger and Mrs. Fuld consented to give Flexner $5 million as a start on the undertaking. Flexner took the money and set about organizing what to this day remains a gem in the tapestry of Western civilization.

In his autobiography Flexner writes that he deliberately laid aside the question, "What use can be made of the result of this investigation?" His interest was in thought, undefiled by concern for practical ends. In establishing the Institute he was unabashedly aristocratic in his methods. His aim was to provide the facilities for only the very best thinkers to pursue their diverse goals. His institute, he said, would be "small and plastic . . . a haven where scholars and scientists could regard the world and its phenomena as their laboratory, without being carried off in the maelstrom of the immediate; it should be simple, comfortable, quiet without being monastic or remote; it should be afraid of no issue." Flexner did not abjure the training of younger men, but his interest was in an elite of mature students, already competent in their fields, who could profit by association with the masters without being a distraction to them. On a quiet field not far from Princeton University Flexner built his Institute, and to it he invited some of the best minds on earth.

Intellectuals' Refuge

Flexner was even more prophetic than he knew, for hardly was the Institute founded than the Nazi holocaust engulfed Germany, imposing on the United States new challenges and opportunities in the field of the intellect. In the ensuing years, brilliant names in scholarship found their home at the Institute for Advanced Study. Most notable was the great Albert Einstein, whose presence alone sufficed to establish it in the front rank among scholarly organizations. Einstein was followed by Professor Herman Weyl, a renowned mathematician from Göttingen, and Professor John von Neumann, a Hungarian mathematician of much promise, then teaching at the University of Berlin. Among the celebrated humanists who joined them in the first years of the Institute were Professor Ernst Herzfeld, a specialist on the ancient East, and Professor Erwin Panofsky of the University of Hamburg, an art historian. Flexner, of course, did not limit his search to Germany but ranged widely throughout Europe, the United States and elsewhere in the world. Even as an infant institution, the Institute for Advanced Study met Flexner's high ambition of serving as a focus for the world's most refined studies.

Nor has the Institute ever really departed from Flexner's conception. The Institute, for example, retains his preference for theoretical undertakings, if only because they require a lesser degree of organization and a smaller outlay of capital than experimental work. It also continues to seek out scholars internationally. Flexner himself re-

Milton Viorst is the author of Hostile Allies, *a study of the troubled relationship between FDR and General de Gaulle during World War II.*